CRITICS CHOICE MAGAZINE

DARK KNIGHT

AN ANALYSIS

THE ONLY MAJOR ANALYSIS OF MILLER'S CLASSIC DARK KNIGHT AND BATMAN YEAR ONE

BY MARTIN CANNON

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EDITED AND DESIGNED
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BY
MARTIN
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THE BATMAN: YEAR ONE

BATMAN: YEAR ONE

Batman #404

Miller structures "Batman: Year One" around the calendar; he introduces each segment with a subtitle reading "January 4," "June 9," and so forth. One wonders about this practice. After all, is our appreciation of the story significantly increased when we learn that James Gordon arrived in Gotham City on January 4, as opposed to, say, January 6? I'm reminded of the way Jack Webb would begin each Dragnet episode with some spectacularly useless announcement, such as "The city — March 22 — 9:53 a.m." But in the case of the Miller-books, the dates do add a sort of verisimilitude. Occasionally they're quite useful, especially for the purposes of synopsis. So we'll maintain this structure here.

• • •

January 4: Lieutenant James Gordon arrives in Gotham City by train, while Bruce Wayne flies in. Gordon seems to despise the city. We meet Commissioner Loeb and his flunky, detective Flass, and quickly learn to distrust both. Gordon, apparently, has "made mistakes" in the past (something to do with bringing "another cop down"), hence his banishment to Gotham; now Loeb expects the chastened policeman to be a "team player." And Gordon tries to be just that — at least, he keeps his mouth shut when he sees Flass abusing his authority.

February 12: Gordon's team spirit hasn't lasted long. We learn that he has hassled at least one (presumably) dishonest cop. We also learn that his wife Barbara is pregnant.

February 21: Bruce Wayne kicks down some trees in his front yard as he mulls over how to begin his one-man war on crime.

February 26: Flass and Loeb decide that Gordon's "not fitting in;" Flass decides that he and "the boys" should "soften him up."

Chapter One: "Who I Am; How I Came to Be" By Frank Miller and
David Mazzucchelli
Colorist: Richard Lewis
Letterer: Todd Klein
Editor: Denny O'Neil

March 11: The boys — wearing ski masks and brandishing baseball bats — attack Gordon in a parking structure.

Meanwhile, Bruce Wayne, disguised as a disfigured veteran, wanders the worst parts of town, looking for trouble. He's approached by a prepubescent hooker, and gets into a scrape with her pimp. While they fight, the young streetwalker digs a knife into Wayne's thigh. He brushes her away, arousing the ire of her protector, Selina Kyle, a leather-clad dominatrix. Their scuffle is interrupted by the police. The cops shoot Wayne in the arm (or shoulder?, the art's unclear) and cart him off. Despite his wounds, Wayne manages to snap his handcuffs, commandeer the police car, and escape.

Back to Gordon. He's been beaten rather badly, but not seriously enough to warrant a hospital stay. He tracks down Flass, follows him down a country road, and sideswipes his car. They get out of their cars and fight by the side of the road; Gordon wins, and leaves his opponent on the ground, stripped and handcuffed.

Wayne Manor. Mulling over the night's errors, Wayne searches for a gimmick, a method of striking fear into the hearts of criminals. A bat smashes-through a closed window..

• • •

Ah, for the halcyon days when it was sufficiently dramatic for a bat to fly through an open window...!

Miller miniseries tend to begin better than they end — Elektra being the most spectacular example — and Batman: Year

One proves no exception, though it's probably Miller's most consistently entertaining effort to date. With supreme economy, he and Mazzucchelli establish a harsh, corrosive, thoroughly convincing backdrop; this reality feels lived, not concocted. At times, Miller dispenses with traditional comic book artifice almost as thoroughly as do, say, Harvey Pekar and Art Spiegleman in their "documentary" comics. That's why the first installment works better than what follows: When the guy in the grey tights shows up in chapter 2, he inevitably drags us back into cloud-cuckoo-land.

Miller's approach reminds me of Sergio Leone's westerns. Compared to the typical Hollywood oater, Leone's films were strictly no-BS material — as bitter as Bierce, as naturalistic as Norris, and as violent as life itself. Yet despite his insistence on realism, Leone told stories about Uebermenschen. No John Wayne film had the sordid, cynical backdrop you see in The Good, the Bad and the Ugly, yet no John Wayne character ever had Clint Eastwood's supernaturally accurate aim. Leone's films could look like documentaries, yet his protagonists could act like cartoon characters.

In much the same way, Miller sets his story in the seamiest, slimiest environment yet seen in a mainstream comic — that scene with the child streetwalker was about as mean as it could get. (And, alas, accurate. Hookers really will risk their lives to protect their pimps, the very men who are literally killing them. I've seen it happen. I'll never understand the psychology involved.) Aside from the pubescent prostitute, this story gives us a leather-clad dominatrix, a vicious pimp, two gunshot murders, another near-fatal shooting, an assault by four men carrying baseball bats, a knifing, several severe beatings, crooked cops, corrupt politicos, drunks in doorways, dopers on streetcorners, filthy streets, and a sky

stained a permanent ozone grey. And this is just the first chapter!

And yet: It's also a story in which the main character can snap his handcuffs simply by flexing his muscles — this, after he's taken a bullet in the arm and a knife in the thigh. It's also a story in which Gordon, shortly after a brutal beating, hasn't any qualms about facing down Flass, a Green Beret who's younger, bigger, and taller. Gordon even hands his opponent a baseball bat, because "he deserves a handicap."

Fairly unbelievable stuff. Of course, none of it strains credibility nearly so severely as do most other comic books, what with their radioactive spiders and power rings and Norse Gods and whatnot. But those stories operate against a rather different background, and they invite us to make allowances which we really can't grant to a writer like Miller.

It's a matter of tone. Almost all superhero stories, even the ones which try to grapple with"controversial" issues or profound themes, have a somewhat fanciful flavor. They don't try nearly so hard as Miller's work does to establish what a '50s Hollywood ad-man once called "the look and feel of real." To put it bluntly, most comics are fantasies. That's offered as description, not insult; after all, Parsifal and A Midsummer Night's Dream are also fantasies. We don't need to find a story credible for it to move or inspire us. But we've every right to expect a writer to continue his story in the same mode he used to begin it.

If Daredevil, Dark Knight, and Batman: Year One prove

anything, it's that Miller feels uncomfortable with — or is outgrowing, or simply moving away from — the sort of fantasy we generally expect from comics. He writes terrific crime stories. Perhaps he simply should recognise his strengths, and keep away from the sort of slap-happy outlandishness we find in other people's comic books. Perhaps, one day, editors and "the market" permitting, he should forego the superhero genre entirely. I suspect that Elektra and Ronin failed to set records at the comics stores because Miller stepped too far out of his element. Ronin worked best when it dealt with street people and con artists and gangs and cops and other urban concerns, just as Elektra worked best when it dealt with political corruption, Latin American torturers, CIA skullduggery, and similar "real world" issues. But when Miller started stuffing both stories chock-full of mad computers, demons, robot-men, mind transplants, and so on — well, all I can say is that Stan Lee and Jack Kirby handled that sort of thing lots better.

Then again, I'm hardly in a position to make an ex cathedra judgement as to what sort of story Miller should write. And I'm perfectly aware of the commercial realities that obtain in the comics industry: DC comics is scarcely going to publish a series entitled "James Gordon, Year One," though that's what Batman #404-408 sometimes threatens (promises?) to turn into. Given the fact that Miller's grit-and-grime crime comics have to include Men Without Fear and Caped Crusaders, one can only admire how well he manages this potentially disruptive figure/ground relationship. Leone also knew how to pull off this trick; few others do.

Miller remembers how to do one other trick that most of his peers have forgotten: He can tell a lot of story in one issue. The rivalry between Gordon and Flass would have been a five-issue subplot in

most comics. Bruce Wayne's big action" scene lasts only four pages, and covers a lot of territory, yet it doesn't feel cramped.

Mazzucchelli here far surpasses his Daredevil work. All artists have their sources, and it's easy to spot the influences here: Caniff, Munoz, Pratt, Toth, Eisner (there's a little Eisner in every good comic, I think) and Miller himself. But Mazzucchelli has a unique look. His simple, spare language of marks and lines conveys a surprising amount of information; he achieves effortlessly lighting effects that other artists can bring off only with a lot of huffing and puffing. Note especially page 14, where, with the greatest economy, he imparts the sense of lights flashing past the windows of a speeding vehicle. I must confess, though, that I'm a bit bewildered by the inconsistent light source on page 20.

BATMAN: YEAR ONE

Batman #405

April 4: A looney-bin escapee holds three children hostage; Gordon races to the scene before SWAT team leader Branden turns the tense situation into a massacre. Gordon drops his gun, enters the building, approaches the madman and disarms him.

April 5: The city has a new hero. Commissioner Loeb doesn't like this new turn of events.

April 9: Enter Batman, foiling a heist from a twentieth floor apartment. His inexperience almost kills him, but he manages to subdue the three burglars.

May 15: Lt. Gordon and his men review the sketchy information they have about Batman. We learn that Detective Flass ran into him recently. It seems that he was "apprehending" (read: being paid off by) some drug pushers when Batman showed up and put everyone in the hospital, Flass getting the worst of it. He's convinced that Batman's some sort of supernatural creature.

May 19: At his palatial home, CommissionerLoeb entertains local corrupt politicians and a mafioso or two. Suddenly, lights go off, a window breaks, smoke fills the room, and Batman warns the assembled guests that "None of you are safe."

May 20: Loeb orders Gordon to get Batman.

June 2: A policewoman (presumably Gordon's attractive assistant, Essen) walks down a grim side street, and gets mugged. The mugger's also a cop. Batman watches, but doesn't take the bait.

June 6: Gordon visits Harvey Dent, an upright assistant District Attorney. Gordon thinks he's Batman. Actually, Gordon doesn't know just how close he is to his target: Batman

(who apparently has Dent on his side) is hiding in the office.

Gordon drives off with Essen. She suggests that Batman might be Bruce Wayne; Gordon thinks she may be on to something. Suddenly, an out-of-control truck sideswipes the car. The truck heads directly for a bag lady. Batman rescues her. Essen gets the drop on him, but Batman escapes her when she turns her head. He heads into a blind alley; Branden shows up. One of the SWAT team members shoots Batman in the leg, which doesn't stop him from escaping into an abandoned building. Branden drops a bomb on the building.

• • •

This fellow Branden seems to have studied police tactics in Philadelphia. I'm a little bewildered by the way Miller keeps this character out of sight (excepting one small panel), because he plays an important role in this issue. Throughout the book, Gordon and he act out a good cop/bad cop routine; Branden's the kind of policeman who wouldn't mind using a tactical nuclear weapon to stop a mugging, while Gordon repeatedly refers to his gun as "a burden" and claims to despise his job. Corrupt cops, Miller tells us, use police state tactics, while honest ones go by the book.

Ah, but wait a minute — this comic is called Batman, remember? Batman doesn't exactly go by the book himself, which fact tends to blow Miller's good cop/bad cop dichotomy all to hell. Indeed, elsewhere in this book, Miller implies that Batman

came into being because Gotham's corrupt constabulary treated wrongdoers too gingerly. And Dark Knight certainly gives one the impression that Batman relishes the use of violence almost as much as Branden does.

In matters of crime and punishment, Miller betrays an attitude so ambivalent it borders on schizophrenia. On one hand, he maintains a proper liberal abhorrence of excessive police force and quasi-fascist tactics; he recognizes that those who claim to uphold the law must operate within thelaw. On the other hand, he sometimes indicates that he'd like to see all the street creeps get blown away, and would rather not quibble about who does it or under what circumstances. I can sympathise. To an extent, we all share this schizophrenia; even the most liberal among us will, after experiencing a criminal attack, console himself by mentally devising a series of sadistic tortures and public humiliations for the malefactor who dared assailed us. We thirst for a cathartic vengeance, and that very thirst is what creates, I think, vigilante characters such as the Batman. He can wring the necks we would like to, but cannot.

But: we haven't the courage for our catharsis; we understand that our blood-lust visions of revenge would, if realised, prove a greater social evil than the evildoers themselves. So we do not act out our dreams of getting even. We insist that cops operate within fair and reasonable guidelines. Even in our popular fiction, we impose limits; Batman metes out a vicarious vengeance, but he can go only so far. He assaults a mafia don, but doesn't really hurt him; the worst he does is destroy the fellow's Rolls Royce. He invades the home of a corrupt police commissioner, but just delivers a warning. He risks his own life to save an armed robber from falling twenty stories.

And he doesn't carry a gun.

We insist on this last point; Batman wouldn't be Batman if he packed a rod. Truth to tell, though, I very much doubt that an unarmed vigilante in real life would last much past year one, or even day one. The character is literally incredible. We could suspend our disbelief in older Batman stories, but now that Miller has injected such realism into the strip, we've got to furrow our brow and say "wait a minute." Miller and Mazzucchelli work hard, and often successfully, to make us "buy" the idea of a Batman, but because they cannot give him lethal weaponry (or, I suppose, an appropriate super-power) they cannot fully convince us that he would survive all those encounters with armed opponents. The writer and artist cannot escape the tyranny of what I call the BS scene. (I would call it something stronger were my publisher less prudish.)

What's a BS scene? It's a scene in which a character should get the old hot lead shower, but doesn't. There's a good example on page 20, where Essen has the drop on Batman. She diverts her glance for a second — and wham! Batman's knocked her gun away. Conveniently, Gordon's too dazed to hold his gun straight, though he recovers by the next panel. Also check out page 11, where a thug fires and misses at point-blank range — why doesn't he shoot again?

Frank Miller, Lord knows, did not invent the BS scene; it just looks worse coming from him. For decades, Batman and Robin have swung down upon robberies in progress, kicking away guns

from dangerous felons, or dodging bullets fired by thugs outside kicking range. How many times have we read words to the effect of "They're moving so fast...I don't know where to shoot.."? BS scenes occur so frequently in comics that aficionados hardly even notice them any more. Perhaps the ultimate example occurred in that issue of Master of Kung Fu in which Shang Chi, using nothing more than his bare hands, plucked a bullet in mid-flight. Yet I think I'll always remember most fondly the uproariously silly BS scenes that afflicted nearly every page of Sgt. Fury's Howling Commandos. That was one comic in which the characters did bear arms — yet the commandos, ostensibly soldiers in combat, somehow always managed to shoot the guns out of the hands of attacking Nazis, presumably because our boys would lose sympathy if we saw them actually gunning folks down. (Somebody has just got to revive that series and play it for laughs.)

If shooting guns out of enemy hands represents version B of the standard BS scene, then Miller has made a specialty of a third variant. Check out page 21, where Batman escapes the SWAT team: "(I) catch a bullet in the leg...ignore it..." Ignore it? A bullet in the leg? Yet ignore it Batman does — he even, in the next issue, uses that self same leg to split half a large stone column! C-type BS incidents occur so frequently in Year One and Dark Knight that they threaten to turn into a running gag. I suppose these scenes are a little more credible than Batman never getting hit at all, but they get a little hard to take if you read all eight issues at once.

Well, maybe a Batman story without a BS scene or two just can't be done. Certainly, we can't fairly hold Miller to task for a stupid genre convention that afflicts comics as a whole.

While I wouldn't take him him to task for it, Miller also makes use of

another genre convention here one little seen in comics, but familiar to anyone who has watched many romantic films of the '40s. When Essen lights Gordon's cigarette in this issue, not once but twice, we just know an extra-marital affair's a-brewin', just as surely as an evangelist's tears signal a plea for payola. Remember Now Voyager? Now, I've never figured out exactly why anyone would view a clump of carcinogens wrapped in a white paper cylinder as being somehow charged with sexual overtones — but, hey, it seems to work for some people. Warning: If Miller ever cuts from a romantic scene to a shot of a train entering a tunnel, or to a fireplace, or to crashing ocean waves, he's lost me forever.

Enough quibbles. Mazzucchelli's Batman will no doubt aggravate and unnerve a great many younger comics fans, who expect their superheroes to look like dessicated corpses, all bulging muscle and bone — "cut" as the body-builders say. Many fans would call, say, John Byrne a more "realistic" artist than Mazzucchelli, yet if you look at pictures of well-built men, you'll realise that the Year One version of Batman actually approximates life rather more closely than the traditional comics approach. Most artists use thick black marks to gouge out even the tiniest undulations of human anatomy, when in fact the twists and turns of the muscle system are so subtle that they often don't even show up in photographs of athletes (that "cut" look you see in the fitness magazines is, at least partially, the result of careful lighting and oils.) Mazzucchelli prefers to pay attention to outline and shadow. I like the fact that his Batman looks, for once, like a man in a costume, not a man who has received a coat of grey spray-paint. And I love the cape; at last, it looks like a real cape, not a parachute or a mis-stitched vinyl raincoat.

June 7: The building catches fire, as does the thermite in Batman's belt. He notices a metal hatch in the floor — perhaps he can escape into a basement.

Selina Kyle and Holly live nearby. They decide to check out the scene. Meanwhile, Branden's SWAT team rushes into the building; the Commissioner wants a corpse, and Branden's happy to deliver.

The SWAT team enters, and inspects the basement. No Batman there. Actually, he has climbed up a chimney and taken out the two men guarding the first floor. He holds off the remaining men for another few pages — aided by, of all things, Selina Kyle's siamese cat — and catches yet another bullet in the arm. Enough is enough. He ends the game by using an ultrasonic transmitter to attract thousands of bats from the caves beneath Wayne Manor; this unusual "cloud cover" masks his escape.

June 9: Gordon calls Bruce Wayne — or someone he thinks is Wayne — in Switzerland. "Wayne" claims to have had a skiing accident; the casts cover exactly the areas where Batman received bullet wounds.

June 15: Wayne goes to Switzerland. On the slopes, he decides that he needs Gordon on his side.

June 17: Selina Kyle punches out her pimp. She has some notions about a new line of work.

July 5: Sarah Essen and Jim Gordon have taken to sharing a cup of coffee after work each evening. Clearly, they're attracted to each other, and even share a kiss in the rain.

August 7: Selina dons her Catwoman costume and leaps out into the night. Gordon mulls over his situation: His wife is pregnant,

yet he's falling for another woman; he has to bring in Batman, yet he increasingly sympathizes with him.

* * *

The best issue of this series, and the one about which I have the least to say. Miller devotes quite a few pages to the assault on the warehouse, and it's clearly the single best set piece in all four issues — a superb piece of comics storytelling that conveys a sense of chaotic action, yet never confuses the reader or fudges important details. If you scan rapidly from image to image, ignoring the text, you'll find that Mazzucchelli — like Kirby at his best — imparts a genuine feeling of kinesis, yet we never lose sight of where the characters are or what they're doing.

Batman stops yet another bullet during this sequence. Third time in three issues. If Frank Miller wrote scripts for this book on a regular basis, Batman would probably end up looking much like that limbless knight in Monty Python and the Holy Grail.

Two moments remained in my memory long after I'd finished the comic. The last panel must be the most troubling image Mazzucchelli has ever produced; like many of his best compositions, it could serve as the basis for a fine painting (Eric Fischl has recently made quite a splash in the art world with rather similar scenes.) And the brief sequence on page 12 — the siamese cat returning to Selina — conveys a particularly striking sense of movement.

I wonder if Miller ever plans, or planned, to write a

further Batman story with Holly and Selina. The character of Holly remains something unique in mainstream comics, perhaps even in all comics; surprised as I am to see a child prostitute crop up in a Batman story, I am absolutely flabbergasted to see the character handled so unsentimentally, even cynically. Her every dialogue balloon reveals, once again, Miller's excellent ear for speech patterns: "SeLINa — you punched STAan—" Speak ing of Stan: Frozen foot syndrome, it seems, kept Miller and Mazzucchelli from making him black, though his dialogue and clothes conform to our image of the inner city black pimp. Interestingly, the creators paint Stan so white he borders on the porceline, as though ascribing mere caucasian-ness to him might not be enough to duck the charge of racism.

I don't like this Catwoman costume. Truth to tell, I don't care for any of the costumes she's been saddled with; if Mr. Blackwell ever gave out an award for the worst-dressed comic book character... No, wait a minute. There was one costume I liked: A shiny black number worn by Julie Newmarr on the old, much-maligned Batman TV series. But that case is special. There comes a moment in every little boy's life when he first learns to appreciate some important architectural differences between the sexes; for most fellows of my generation, that burst of enlightenment generally occurred in a movie theatre, when Ursula Andress walked onto the beach in Dr. No — but for at least one seven-year-old lad, samsara struck on a Thursday night in 1966, as he sat before the television screen...

BATMAN: YEAR ONE

Batman #407

September 2: Jim tells Sarah he has to stop seeing her. She decides to go to New York.

September 5: Harvey Dent has allowed a drug merchant named Skeevers go free on bail, enraging Gordon. Little does he know that Dent's working with Batman, who visits Skeevers that evening and violently pressures him to testify against Flass.

September 12: Skeevers decides to testify.

September 13: Loeb realises this scandal might well reach him. He plays his trump card: A revealing photograph of Essen and Gordon together. The press and Gordon's wife will see this picture if Gordon refuses to play ball.

September 25: The Gordons visit Bruce Wayne, who provides alibis for the nights Batman was spotted. ("They're all women. They're all famous. They're all beautiful.") Driving home, Gordon still thinks that Wayne is hiding something -- suddenly, he remembers that he is hiding something. Time to make a clean breast of things.

October 2: Flass, grilled by his fellow cops, cryptically remarks that Skeevers might not live to testify.

October 7: Somebody unsuccessfully tries to poison Skeevers.

October 12: Gordon's son is born.

November 2: Batman has received the blame for crimes committed by the Catwoman, which riles her no end. She decides to visit the Roman (whom we met at Loeb's party) that evening. So, coincidentally, does Batman.

The Roman, it seems, plots with his nephew to find some way to contain the growing scandal. Catwoman arrives, rather too noisily; gunmen circle her; Batman, from a concealed location, takes them out

and, in effect, rescues her.

November 3: Wayne listens to the tape recording he took of the conversation between the Roman and his nephew. He knows that they won't commit murder, for risk of bringing even greater unwanted attention. Batman guesses, rightly, that they are going to use Gordon's newborn son to get the investigation ended.

That evening, Loeb telephones Gordon, insisting that he attend to some minor matter immediately. Gordon leaves, but notices Wayne, on motorcycle (and sans costume), heading toward his apartment building. He turns, enters the parking garage — and discovers the Roman's nephew attempting to take his wife and son away in a black Mercedes. He fires, frees his wife, but the nephew gets away with the baby.

Wayne starts his motorcycle; Gordon fires at him, then commandeers the cycle. Wayne, uninjured (he's wearing a bullet- proof vest), steals a bicycle and follows after.

On a bridge, Gordon shoots out the Mercedes' tires, causing the car to crash. The nephew and he scuffle; the baby is accidentally thrown over the bridge. In a mad (and physically impossible) dive, Wayne rescues the child. Gordon claims to be unable to recognise Wayne's face ("You know, I'm practically blind without these glasses"), but that's just his way of signalling that Batman's secret is safe with him.

December 3: Da wrap-up: Grass spills the beans; Loeb goes down; The Roman may

soon follow; Gordon gets promoted. Sarah's in New York; the Gordon's have been seeing a counsellor. A fellow called the Joker threatens to poison the city's water supply. Gordon has decided to call a friend for help on the case.

• • •

The lonely urban greasy spoon in scene one bears the name "Hopper's." Get it?

Frank Miller may be the Jeremy Bentham of comics: utility and thrift count for all. He leads us through this story's many curves and climbs with nary a wasted motion, and always manages to set up events convincingly without ever signalling his intentions in an obvious fashion. Every element of the story does double-, and even triple-duty. Gordon's child, for example: Mrs. Gordon's pregnancy makes her husband's affair all the more wrenching, and also emphasizes the "year one" time frame. The baby provides a logical target for the bad guys, while the foiled kidnapping provides a convincing rationale for Gordon's change of heart about the vigilante situation.

I wonder: when, in Chapter One, Miller first decided to let the stork visit the Gordon household, did he know just how useful the new arrival would prove? Is Chapter Four a brilliant improvisation on a preexisting theme, or did the writer have all these details mapped out in his noggin before he began typing out the first page of the first volume? We'll never know; maybe even Miller doesn't know. The creative process is as elusive as the Brown Mountain lights.

At times, perhaps, Miller's economies prove short-sighted. I'd have liked to see another page or so devoted to the Catwoman, and perhaps a scene of reconciliation between Gordon and his wife. Also: why did Batman suspect that the Ro man, and not any one of a half-dozen other shady-looking charact-

ers at Loeb's gathering, would be the one to put pressure on Gordon? And Skeevers proves a key player in the drama; his apprehension shouldn't have occurred off-screen. None of these quibbles really matter; I mention them because Miller could have easily avoided all of them if he'd had another, say, seven pages to fill, or maybe a Chapter Five. As things are, I admire the way Miller cuts his narrative to the bone, but I fear that sometimes he nicks into the marrow.

I do have one major complaint: Page 22, climax of the drama, and ultimate BS scene of the series. The baby gets tossed over the side of the bridge, down to the mud below. Wayne, high above in the girders, plunges after, scoops up the kid in midflight, and delivers same safely.

Oh fer shuuurrre.

Mr. Miller, there was this fella named Galileo, see, whom you seem to have forgotten. (Whereas I cannot. I come from a Catholic background; we're reminded of Galileo every five minutes by folks with a grudge against the R.C.s.) Now, according to most elementary school textbooks, Galileo once dropped two equally sized objects off the top of the Leaning Tower of Pisa; the weights of these objects differed, yet they struck the soil at the same time. Actually, researchers now consider this story something of a Rennaissance urban legend, rather like the tall tales people tell about Catherine the Great's horsing around. But the principle's valid. You could travel to Italy, drop detritius from

the top of the L.T. of P., and time the objects as they speed groundward. They'd hit at the same time. (And if you videotaped such experiments, you'd have a good shot at getting on the Letterman show.) Things fall at the same rate of speed.

What does this have to do with Batman? Simply that Bruce Wayne, diving off a high girder, couldn't possibly catch in mid- air a baby thrown from a lower level. Instead, down would come baby, with a 180-lb Wayne tumbling after, turning what remains of Junior into something resembling an unrolled strawberry crepe.

What's that I hear from the peanut gallery? You say Wayne pushed himself off the girder with enough velocity to catch up with the tyke? Doubt if that's possible, and even if it were, howcum Wayne and co. survive such a mighty headlong plunge with nary a broken bone? Judging from panel 5, Wayne seems to be some 60 feet up. You'd think the fall would leave him knocked out, bruised, staggering, delirious. Or, most likely of all, dead. (In a '40s crime movie, Wayne would simply have shot Gordon's adversary, and Gordon would have stopped short his baby's plunge. Ah, but as we discussed earlier, Batman operates according to an odd inverse of the Second Amendment.)

All right, call me a pedant for sniggering at this scene. Maybe suspension of disbelief comes harder for me than for some other folks. Some people make a point of believing anything; look at how well the Ram tha books are selling. Others take nothing on faith. Me, I tend to want two sources when looking up telephone numbers.

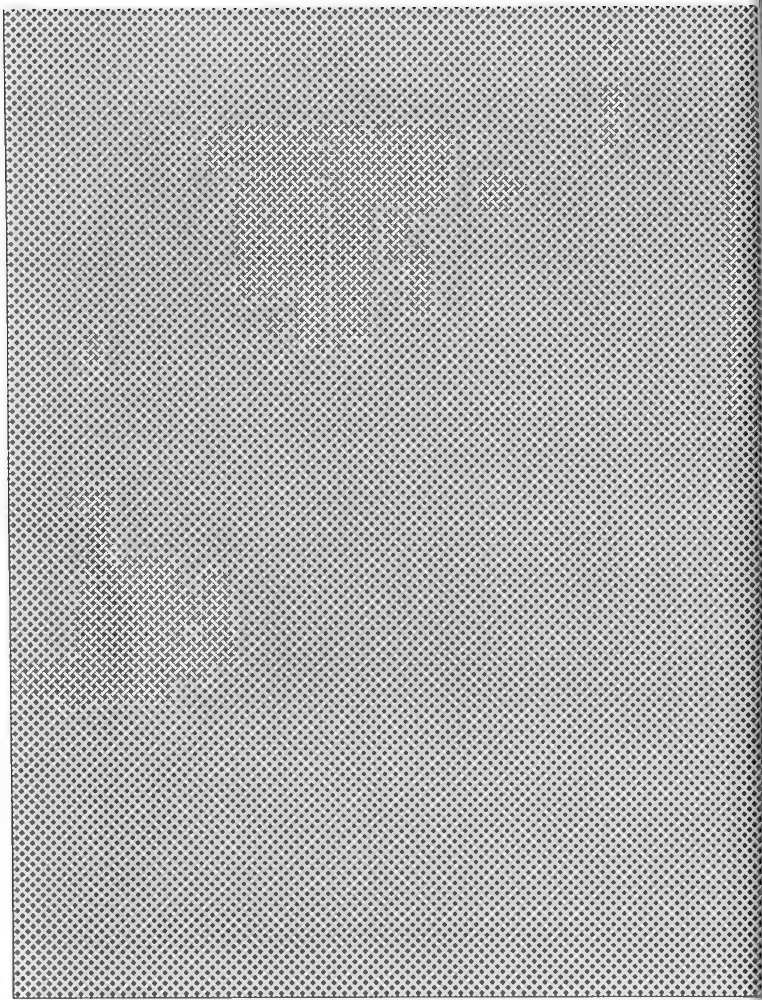
In Summation...

So, how does Batman's first year look in review? Pretty good, pretty good indeed. Throughout, Frank Miller's writing combines tight plotting, keen psychological insight, crisp dialogue and a convincingly seedy

amblence, while Mazzucchelli has reminded us that there's more than one way to draw comics. Some reviewers felt a little intimidated by the exceedingly grim atmosphere and capfious worldview — but at least Miller has a worldview. (More than you can say for some comic book writers.) This is, in short, a terrific crime story, marred only by the shotgun wedding of the cops-and-robbers genre and the costumed-hero conventions mandated by the marketplace. Traditional superhero comics emphasize fantasy, while Year One tells a more realistic story; this Batman is not the one we met via Bob Kane, Gardner Fox, Bill Finger, Jerry Robinson, Denny O'Neil, Neal Adams and all the others. Indeed, this story carries such a grimly realistic tone that Batman almost becomes an outcast in his own comic. Poser for the day: Is Bruce Wayne or James Gordon the protagonist of this story? To put it another way, is Batman, like Shakespeare's Ceasar, a supporting character in a drama that bears his name? Follow-up question: Could this story, or one much like it, have worked without Batman?

Batman: Year One reminds me of a party I once attended. The setting was perfect, the time passed quickly, and the guests all fascinated — the only problem was the host himself, an eccentric fellow, occasionally given to odd, hard-to-justify behavior. Perhaps, though, we wouldn't have bothered to show up if he were a less colorful personality.

PS: We know that Gordon will eventually divorce Barbara and marry Sarah. We also know that Gordon will have a daughter named Barbara. How many women, d'ya think, would let their kid be named after the husband's former wife? Well, I guess that some ladies wouldn't mind...



THE DARK KNIGHT

INTRODUCTION TO THE DARK KNIGHT

Warning: You'll find complaints in the ensuing pages.

This, despite the many awards and hosannas — not to mention dollars — Dark Knight has generated. And despite the fact that I got caught up in the Dark Knight phenomenon as thoroughly as any of you, haunting the comics shop each week, waiting impatiently for DC to dole out the four installments.

I'm as easily swept away as anyone else by Frank Miller's bravura storytelling and vivid drawing; visually, this may be one of the most flawlessly realised comic stories ever. On each page, Miller teaches us new things about how to tell a story. He keeps his panels small, often repeating images of talking heads a la Gary Trudeau, yet his pages never look crowded and the pace never lets up — and when Miller unleashes a full-pager on us, we can almost feel a gust of wind sweep through our reading room. His linework doesn't have Mazzucchelli's lean, spare, every-stroke-counts approach — but Miller is unmatched for expressiveness, operatic emotion, and infallible sense of composition. Dark Knight, with it's telling exaggerations, repeated visual motifs, and kinetic energy gives us cartooning of the highest order.

Miller couldn't have asked for finer colleagues than Klaus Janson and Lynn Varney — especially the latter; Varney's bold experiments in monochrome pages and subdued pallettes will surely have a strong effect on the way comics look henceforth. On each page of Dark Knight, Varley's painterly approach gives eloquent evidence that, very soon now, the paintbrush will have more to do with the way comics look than will the ink bottle. This is the way all comics should look.

Miller's every bit as inventive sitting before the word processor (typewriter?) as he is holding the drawing pencil. His is a fat-free, incisive writing style, usually percussive, but lyrical when it needs to be. In contradistinction to most of his peers in the industry, who generally can do little more than convey information, Miller's capable of striking metaphors, bold images, and perfectly-executed little phrases that, once read, nest within your mind alongside your favorite literary memories. He dapples stray words and thoughts across the page, effectively mimicking the way ideas and concepts flicker in and out of consciousness. And

his weakness for schadenfreude certainly endears him to those of us whose idea of true wit generally runs toward gallows humour.

So why the complaints?

Well, at least partly because I just used up all the praise. A more balanced set of reviews would merely repeat the virtues listed above, for those virtues don't change throughout all four books, while the flaws, though often minor, come at us in a wider variety. But there's more than that.

Wit without an employment, as Robert Burton wrote, is a disease. We must give context to Miller's cleverness; we cannot speak of his manner while ignoring his matter. One hesitates to examine a superhero comic, even the most spectacularly crafted, too closely or too soberly — after all, even the greatest Batman story ever told is still just a Batman story. Yet Miller practically forces us to take his work seriously, not as seriously, perhaps, as we'd take a work by Proust or Joyce, but seriously enough. Dark Knight seems to be about something. That "something" has aroused much controversy, much condemnation, and much confusion. The work challenges us to identify its themes, to discover what made these motifs and observations so important to the artist — and to determine whether the artist, in making those observations, saw clearly.

Book One: The Dark Knight Returns

In the near future:
Billionaire Bruce Wayne hung up his cape and cowl ten years ago, but old obsessions die hard. Gotham overflows with crime, grime, chaos and despair — and as long as he stays in his stylish black business suit, there's nothing he can do to save his city.

Meanwhile, Batman's old foe (and onetime friend) Harvey Dent, a.k.a. Two-face, has received rehabilitative therapy: a wonder-working plastic surgeon has managed to clear away the scars. His psychiatrist, Dr. Bartholomew Wolper, tells the media "Harvey's ready to look at the world and say, "Hey — I'm okay." Despite this vote of confidence, Commissioner Gordon dislikes the idea of letting the former arch-criminal go free. But Dent's sponsor — Bruce Wayne — secures his release.

Wolper and Wayne may have acted too hastily. Shortly after Dent's release, he disappears.

Wayne continues to be haunted by the old fixations. Mentally, he relives the day he discovered the batcave as a child, as well as the night his mother and father died. It's no use. He can't stay hidden.

So he comes back — first to stop an attempted rape — next to halt a vicious pimp — then to save two teenage girls from a horrible assault by members of the "Mutant" gang. Batman has returned.

In rapid succession we see: a bank robbery — a pursuit — a showdown in an abandoned building. Batman disables the robbers, and hands them over to the cops...but not before retrieving a vital clue: a coin defaced on both sides. (Two-face's traditional "motif" was a coin defaced on one side.)

The populace becomes deeply split on "the Batman controversy;" some applaud the vigilante, while others consider him a menace to so-

ciety. Wolper becomes Batman's most vocal opponent.

Batman tracks down Two-face's hideout (how?), finds a member of the gang, and tortures information out of him. He discovers that T-F's next target is "twice as big as you can imagine." Batman deduces that this refers to Gotham's twin towers. That night, he lies in wait atop one of the towers; he's still not sure if Harvey Dent's really gone back to crime.

One major melee later:

Batman, having foiled an elaborate ransom scheme and saved the towers from demolition, discovers that these new Two-face crimes really are being perpetrated by Dent — who insanely believes that his face remains ruined; in his mind's eye, both sides are now horribly scarred. His obsession has overtaken him. Bruce Wayne understands the situation all too well.

• • •

What are we to make of The Dark Knight? Within hours of volume one hitting the stands, word got around that the book had an attitude problem. Everyone grants Frank Miller's craftsmanship, but few agree on his work's ultimate meaning or value. Some call this revisionist version of the Batman mythos a masterwork, while others call it Rambo in a cape.

This last sobriquet comes to us via C. Carr, writing in the Village Voice — which gives you one measure of DK's very real accomplishment: it actually garnered reviews in the Establishment press, written

by and for people who don't care much anymore about homework, heavy metal or acne. Carr considers the work "neo-conservative propaganda," insidiously disguised by doses of liberal lingo.

There's a certain truth in Carr's wolf-in-sheep's-clothing argument. Dark Knight presents us with unashamed vigilante-think, straight from the cinema of Stallone, Bronson and Eastwood — yet it jabs at President Ronzo, appropriates "60s lingo" (as Carr puts it), professes admiration for snarling lefty Oliver Queen, takes a "politically correct" view of our current Latin American imbroglios, and makes some attempt to show the negative ramifications of vigilanteism. No conservative I, Miller seems to say; I just want we should waste the scumsucking bastards. Can we blame Carr for crying foul? Has Miller merely applied a leftist coating to a fascist pill? Does that paisley jacket cover a brown shirt?

Miller responds to such criticism by explaining that he sees Batman not as a right-winger, but as a radical. And we're supposed to be happy with that pseudo-explanation. I am astonished that bright guys like Steve Gerber and Gary Groth haven't challenged Miller's statement (though they've had plenty of opportunity), for it's every bit as airy and empty-headed as the babble spouted by his character, Dr. Wolper. Of course Miller's Batman is a radical — his actions are hardly those of a moderate — the question is, what kind of radical? Radicals come in only two varieties: left and right. (At least, I've never encountered a radical centrist, and I've hung out with all sorts of political extremists.) Which category does Batman fall into? Well, let's answer that question with another: In the class struggle, whose side is billionaire Bruce Wayne on? The first Dark Knight book gives us a scene in which Batman tortures information out of a wrongdoer, telling him: "You've got rights. Lot's of rights. Sometimes I count them just to make myself feel crazy." Is this a se-

timent we tend to associate with a group like Greenpeace, or with the good folks of the Posse Comitatus? If we wish to read these and similar expressions on a regular basis, which journal gets our subscription — Mother Jones or The National Thunderbolt?

Sorry, Mr. Miller, but calling Batman a radical doesn't explain anything.

And yet...and yet. I don't feel comfortable with Carr's assessment. Miller features "60s lingo" rather too often, and rather too prominently, for the reader to dismiss this liberal language as some sort of smokescreen. Batman uses the phrase "one of our more contemptible wars" to describe Vietnam (well, we presume he means Vietnam); he tries to give Harvey Dent the benefit of the doubt in the face of overwhelming evidence against him; he does not murder (in general — whether he refrains absolutely remains a debatable point); he works hand-in-glove with the anarchistic, and somewhat anachronistic, former Green Arrow. And he eventually gets his comeuppance. Most importantly, Miller allows Batman's defenders their moments of eloquicosity, and lets Commissioner Yindel take the podium to make a few very reasonable and germane points against the vigilante.

I would even go so far as to say that the Dr. Feelgood caricature, Wolper, actually makes a few sharp observations, buried though they are in psycho-jargon. Most people would probably disagree strongly with this assessment, but I refer you to page 39 of the first Dark Knight book: the

good doctor seems to be spewing familiar culture-of-therapy codswollop to excuse criminal wrongdoing, but, after one has read the Joker-Batman love-duet in the third volume, Wolper's argument — that the hero and his villains maintain a symbiotic relationship — seems to describe the situation pretty accurately. When Batman: Year One came out, Miller proved Wolper's claims, by demonstrating how Batman 'created,' after a fashion, the Catwoman.

So — Miller gives us the story of an urban Rambo, yet includes liberal doses (pardon the term) of anti-Rambo sentiment. How do we reconcile this comic's schizophrenia? What are we to make of Frank Miller? What are we to make of Dark Knight?

My own attitudes toward this janus-faced work have flip- flopped like a Chinese puzzle over the past few months, and no doubt will mutate further. Previously, I contented myself with the notion that Miller wanted, for artistic reasons, to maintain a distant, ambivalent attitude toward his vigilante. This view crystallised in my mind when I heard an exchange between Miller and Harlan Ellison on the Los Angeles radio program Hour 25. Ellison let slip some comment about kids taking Dark Knight's Batman as a "role model," to which Miller replied "I think I'd rather undergo a root canal than have to provide a 'role model' for anyone." More than a few listeners murmured bravos.

For too long now, political extremists on both sides have foisted this "role model" buncombe upon us, and we've all assimilated this narrow-minded notion rather more thoroughly than we'd care to admit. We've come to accept the theory that the audience strongly identifies with "the hero," who must therefore provide the impressionable with a good example. This role model theory of narrative ignores the difference between a protagonist and a

hero. Dramas have protagonists; melodramas have heroes. Our society appears to have lost its taste for drama, for three-dimensional characters with flaws, strengths, fear, pride, misguided convictions, noble ideals, and dangerous obsessions. Nowadays, all narrative in popular culture must center on either Overman or Everyman — we require authors to give us a Substitute You, rather like the main figure in a video game. The reader or viewer must identify with whomever fills the screen or the page; the role model theory has infantilised us, reduced us to the level of a child who demands that each bedtime tale carry the preface "This is the story of a little boy just like you." The words "aesthetic distance" have no meaning to most people anymore, even to the college-educated; you might as well try to explain semantics to an ocelot.

I thought that Miller, in Dark Knight, attempted to transcend this "role model" blather, to restore a sense of aesthetic distance, to create drama from the stuff of melodrama — in short, to make a three-dimensional character out of Batman. (A silk-purse-out-of-sow's-ear proposition if ever I heard one, but commercial demands often foist such impossible tasks on artists.) I thought that Batman's viewpoint wasn't meant to be our viewpoint, at least not all of the time.

And, truth to tell, I thought that Miller meant us to see his Batman as something of a nut case.

Others shared this conviction. Gerard Jones, for example, writes in Amazing He-

roes #109: "Wayne is obviously not a sane man, his vow to fight criminals not a noble act." Fans at conventions often asked Miller if Batman was — well, bats. Within the book itself, Bruce Wayne's butler tends to doubt his employer's sanity. I once felt certain that Miller sided with Alfred on that score. I argued that this Batman is no "hero;" he's a madman, who, in his madness, allows us to see one side of ourselves more keenly, rather like, f'rinstance, the protagonist of Paul Theroux's The Misquito Coast. Or Raskolnikov. Or Rorshach.

And yet — and yet. This point of view felt uncomfortable; perhaps I was merely rationalising, making excuses for a favored artist the way Wolper made excuses for favored patients. Miller himself caused this discomfort, by insisting that his character wasn't psychotic. Furthermore, he filled a Comics Journal interview with some faintly disturbing (and confusing) talk about the vigilante as a "powerful, positive force," and about superheroes as "larger than life." He speaks of Batman as a force "beyond good and evil" and even opines that "it's very clear to me that our society is committing suicide by lack of a force like that."

None of this indicates that Miller maintains much "aesthetic distance" from his character. Quite the contrary. When all's said and done, Miller's on Batman's side; he doesn't keep us removed from his character, the way Moore keeps us at arm's length from Rorschach. Miller wants us to applaud his vigilante — indeed, to view him as somehow god-like. In light of the quotes directly above, Miller's disavowal of the "role model" concept seems less a statement of artistic principle and more an excuse for not facing the consequences of his convictions.

And then we must consider the lessons of Elektra. If ever we had doubts about exactly what convictions Miller now holds, Elektra sets us

straight. That miniseries ends with one of the vilest images ever to infest a comic book: G. Gordon Liddy, or a reasonable facsimile thereof, becomes President. We see him with one hand curled around a machine gun, and the other on The Button. He has just used the threat of nuclear extinction to bully a Russian general into accepting American terms. Finis. This has been a happy ending.

When I first read this, all I could say was "Damn — maybe Miller really is a fascist after all."

Yet others read the work differently: Kim Thompson, in Amazing Heroes #114, writes: "Personally, I find (Dark Knight's) politics too silly to take seriously. One of the several reasons I prefer Elektra..." I can understand the first part of that statement. But the second bit...jeez, Thompson, what got into you? (Must be the stultifying atmosphere of Thousand Oaks. I know how it can affect one. After living there for a year, I was saying the damnedest things.)

Actually, I think Thompson's wrong to dismiss all discussion of DK's politics, however silly they seem. Lots of silly stuff deserves to be taken seriously. Example: books such as The Late, Great Planet Earth specialise in major-league silliness, but when some 40 million Americans buy and believe this flapdoodle, we'd better start talking seriously about the public's gullibility. And while DC won't sell anywhere near 40 million copies of Dark Knight, the book has been read widely, and has, presumably, affected its audience.

So — after considering and rejecting one possible answer, the question remains: What are we to make of Dark Knight? What prompts a writer to take an anti-Reagan stance in a comic book about Dirty-Harry-with-a-batarang? By this point, I've run out of conclusions, and must make do with a mere suspicion. It won't explain much. It won't be widely shared. But for what it's worth...

Refer again to that interview in the Journal. Miller begins by expressing his feelings about his New York days, especially his "fury (at) the fact that crime is so much taken for granted that people live in fortresses...acting as if it's all...up to chance, whether or not some monster can rob, rape or kill them." In other interviews, Miller gives us an even starker picture of his New York days. He obviously carries much of that anger with him still.

All this reminds me of an old saying: A conservative is a liberal who's been mugged. Miller got mugged in New York, metaphorically if not actually.

But the axiom implies that conversion happens instantaneously, as with Saul on the road to Damascus. Not so. Sometimes, the process takes years, decades. Often, one must travel a long journey between philosophical milestones. And if, during that trek, one keeps a diary, that journal will probably contain some rather bewildering, wildly self-contradictory entries, as memories of where one has been combine with a vision of where one is going.

Maybe Miller kept his journal in the form of a comic book. Maybe that's why we have such trouble deciding what to make of The Dark Knight. Miller confuses us because Miller is confused.

(We interrupt this exigesis for another plot synopsis. Part two of What-it-all-means resumes shortly thereafter.)

BATMAN: Dark Knight Triumphant

Carrie Kelly, pubescent daughter of aging hippies, has made a Robin costume for herself. She's intent on playing the role once filled by Dick Grayson.

Batman, however, isn't looking for a partner just now — he's after a kidnapped child. He discovers (how? C'mon, Mr. Miller, half the fun of a detective story comes from learning the details of detective work) the hideout, crashes through a wall, grabs a machine gun and blows away the Mutant gang member holding the kid. (This despite the fact that the bad guy's got a gun pointed directly at the youngster's head. Bats takes some terrible risks.)

He carries the other kidnapper to the top of Gotham towers and threatens to drop him if he doesn't spill the beans on a few important items — especially about the source of the Mutant gang's combat weaponry. (This sequence is brilliantly designed, by the way.) Turns out the weapons come from General Nathan Briggs, who needed money to pay for his wife's medical treatment (the VA won't cover Hodgkin's disease?). Briggs commits suicide.

The beleaguered Mayor chooses one Ellen Yindel to replace Gordon. Yindel's outspoken on the Batman issue: She insists on his arrest.

The Mutants gather at the dump to discuss war plans. Batman decides to meet them there. In a tank. He wipes out the Mutant army in short order — only the leader is left. Batman decides to battle this extremely tough fellow man-to-man, for no better reason than the fact that he looks like a suitable challenge. (Bruce Wayne, meet Mr. Hugh Bris.) The battle goes against Batman — the old grey superhero just ain't what he used to be. Carrie/Robin, who secretly attended the Mutant meeting in hopes of encountering Batman, rushes to his aid. Batman manages to get away; police capture the Mutant leader.

Batman decides to accept this new Robin.

And the Mayor decides to negotiate (about what?) with the Mutant leader. Alone. In his cell. Unfortunately, negotiations bog down when the Mutant rips the Mayor's throat out with his teeth.

Batman realises that in order to stop the Mutant army, he needs to humiliate their leader. So he asks Gordon to do him one last favor: let their captive escape.

That night, the Mutant leader's cell door opens; he makes his way to the river. Batman's waiting — and so is the entire Mutant gang, come to see a battle royale. Batman wins.

Thus ends the Mutants. Thus is born "The Sons of the Batman." The SOB's dedicate to fighting crimes — with the same psychopathic frenzy they brought to committing them.

• • •

In the first volume, we learned that Frank Miller was confused. Now we get a clearer idea of what's confusing him.

The most significant page in the entire Dark Knight series is page 40 of book two, where Gordon explains to Yindel why he supports Batman. He recalls Pearl Harbor and its aftermath, and describes how a god-like Roosevelt spoke on the radio, "strong and sure, taking fear and turning it into a fighting spirit." But, he notes, later writers had a more cynical story to tell about Pearl Harbor: "A lot of people with a

lot of evidence said that Roosevelt knew Pearl was going to be attacked — and that he let it happen." Gordon couldn't figure out what to do with this information; he didn't know how to excuse Roosevelt's actions, or inactions — how can one justify letting a lot of innocent men die, simply to give the country a casus belli against an enemy we preferred to ignore? "...I couldn't judge it," says Gordon. "It was too big. He was too big."

Gordon implies that Batman is also "too big" for us to judge him by our terms. We recall Miller's interview: "(Batman) has to be a force that in certain ways is beyond good and evil...our society is committing suicide by lack of a force like that."

Bullshit, Mr. Miller. Bullshit.

Nobody is, or was, "too big." Not even, to use Miller's example, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. We must judge him by the same standards we use for everyone else. If we place Roosevelt above the law and beyond conventional morality, we tacitly admit his enemies' charge that he instituted an "imperial presidency." Worse, we would imply support for the debased notion of an imperial presidency, despite the lessons of our recent history. No. Either FDR did wrong or he did right. If the former, let us continue to applaud him. If the latter, let us re-write the history books and condemn him.

Neither is our society "committing suicide for lack of a force like that." To the contrary. If Watergate proves anything, if Contragate proves anything, if the current wave of fundamentalist foolishness proves anything, it's that society's killing itself through an infantile longing for a force like that. There's something in human nature which renders us incapable of taking responsibility for our own actions; consequently, when our actions frighten us, we want some impossibly "big" father figure to take control, make deci-

sions, restore order. Nixon saw himself as just such a figure. So did Reagan. So do the boob-tube religionists. All of these men were small-time operators who duped themselves and a lot of other folks into believing that they were "too big."

When we give power to these forces, when we allow them to set themselves above our notions of right and wrong, when we lose faith in the law and cry out for a surrogate Dad, that's when our society risks a communal felo-de-se. German society killed itself in exactly the same way. The Germans even had a name for the disease that destroyed them: Ordungsleibe — love of order. They felt this sense of order slipping away, and brought forth an all-powerful father-figure to restore it. (Editor's Note: Here it should be pointed out that this same tragic longing for an a father figure to take responsibility for our lives manifests itself as broadly on the left and liberal spectrums as insidiously as it does on the right and conservative segments of society, resulting in a grasping for strong government and regulatory agencies to watch over every concern and provide protection for all of every pet cause and group. The liberal's insistence that an individual is not responsible for his own actions but that the underlying cause is always society is dangerously close to the right's desire to have society dictate what is right and wrong.)

Notice how, in his soliloquies, Bruce Wayne never addresses his mother — only his father. Wayne lost him, and all order flew out of his life. He becomes Batman be-

cause he feels the world won't make sense again unless he forces it to make sense. He thus becomes a father figure himself, protecting "his" city from the forces of disorder — forces such as the Mutants.

Miller insists that these hoodlums can't even be considered human — after all, if they were human beings, we might have to take responsibility for their creation. Miller seems to be telling us we'd do best not to worry about what made these creatures what they are. Such monsters aren't made — they're born that way. Stop making excuses for 'em; just wipe 'em out, the same way you'd wipe out a dangerous virus. The law can't do the job; bleeding heart liberal whiners have rendered the law impotent. We need Big Daddy. He'll take care of the bastards.

In Dark Knight, we have the stuff of a myth. A very dangerous myth.

How to answer this myth? Surprisingly enough, a comic book has already done the job for us. You'll never guess who wrote and drew this comic.

A fellow named Frank Miller.

This other Frank Miller — they can't be the same man — finished his first Daredevil run with a terrific story, one of the best ever produced in the medium, which called into question the underpinnings of the entire superhero genre. I want to recall that story here, for it points out exactly where Dark Knight goes dead wrong. (I don't have the issue at hand; forgive any lapses in memory.)

As I recall, that issue started in a hospital. Daredevil has sneaked into an intensive care ward, and holds a gun on his old enemy Bullseye, who lies in a coma. DD could — part of him believes should — rid the world of this killer once and for all. But he won't, and he tells us why.

Flashback: We meet a young boy named Chuckie who has two heroes: his father and Daredevil. The boy doesn't know that Dad's a crooked businessman, whose shady dealings make him a perfect target for blackmail by other crooks. DD

finds out the truth, and, in a vain show of his prowess, lambasts Chuckie's father — in front of the child. Chuckie goes into shock; both his idols have been shattered; his world no longer makes sense. His life is destroyed.

Second flashback: Daredevil recalls how he used to idolize his father. Yet this god-like figure also disillusioned him. Daredevil recalls one particularly disturbing incident when his father came home drunk and knocked his young son across the room. The boy ran away. That night, he understood for the first time that matters of right and wrong can't be determined by any one individual, for all individuals — even one's father—we're too small. And thus, that night, young Matt decided to become a lawyer. Only the law — an abstract concept, not a person — is big enough.

And that's why, when Daredevil has the chance to take the law into his own hands, his "gun has no bullets."

The Frank Miller who wrote that story could see through the myth of Big Daddy; the other fellow, the one who draws pictures of Batman, insists on maintaining his illusions.

Mr. Miller, I didn't bother trying to interview you for this book, because I know you've got a beef with my publisher. But if I could conduct such an interview, I might well limit my interrogation to this one request:

"Frank, tell me about your father."

• • •

Having finished with my overwrought explorations of what- it-all-means, and having even lapsed into the psycho-analytic approach to art criticism (a mode I generally despise), it's time to make the big confession: I enjoyed much of Dark Knight Triumphant.

"Huh?" you say. "After hollering

'right-wing propaganda' for umpteem pages, this guy has the gall to claim that he likes the damn thing? How can he contradict himself like that?"

I dunno. Guess it comes from all those cinema classes I took. Once you've learned to appreciate both Potemkin and Triumph of the Will, you've learned to find value in works with themes a million miles away from anything you can justify to yourself ethically. I'm disturbed by what Miller says, but I'm easily seduced by how he says it. As critic R. Fiore put it, "I wouldn't want to elect the guy senator, but he can write my crime comics any day."

What I like best about this installment are the screen-shaped panels, which carry some of Miller's sharpest social commentary. Stray pieces of information fly around us like snow flurries: "The political performance commission has awarded the President an unprecedented five credibility points for his handling of public perception during the economic crisis..." "That's right! We've got videotape of the Mayor's murder! Only on channel two..." Jonathan Swift would have been pleased.

Miller also takes us on several "side-trips" in this issue, as he explores Batman's effect on the city at large, and these one-page short stories contain some beautiful writing. The brief tale of one Arnold Crimp particularly impresses. Arnold, a record store employee, has heard that Led Zeppelin hid the words "my sweet Satan" in their song "Satirway to Heaven." ("He played it forty-seven times until he was absolutely sure that Father Don was right... He lost his temper and broke the record into four pieces that were exactly the same size.") Attending a pornographic film with exactly that title, Crimp pulls out a pistol and kills three patrons in what the media, naturally, calls a "Batman-inspired porn-theatre shoot-out." Y'know, I'm beginning to think I like the oddball characters skulking around the edges of Miller's tales rather more than the folks on center stage.

High time Batman returned to the old costume. And three — no, that's not generous enough, four cheers for Lynn Varney for coloring it properly: Black and grey, not blue and grey (or, worse, blue and light purple). Conventional comics coloring had a hard time dealing with a monochromatic costume, but now that

the technology of comics has started to improve, Batman should show his true colors more often.

Miller always amuses when he plays with language, and I especially enjoy page 37, which is presented entirely in Mutant, without English subtitles. But one aspect of the Mutants' dialogue troubles me. Here's a collection of choice bits of mutant-speak: "I be callin' in an hour wif th where an when." "Hit it wif th trank, man..." "Les jus flush im down th john, man." "They think we jus noisy kids...."

Get it? Miller (or Varney) keeps the Mutants bathed in light grey washes, so we can never quite tell what race they're supposed to be. But he lets dialect do the dirty work for him.

This tactic reminds me of a joke that made the rounds a couple of decades ago. There was an Irish priest who filled all of his sermons with diatribes against the British, railing loudly against every atrocity committed by the English since the days of Cromwell. Finally, his Bishop tells him to cool it. The priest is ordered to get through at least one sermon without making a reference to the Brits. The chastened Father reluctantly agrees. That Sunday, he chooses as his text the story of the Last Supper. But he tells it with a twist: "And the dear Lord said, 'One of you sitting here with me shall betray me.' And there was silence. And then Judas said...'Blimey, guv'nor, wot ever gave you a bloody fool idea like that?'"

Hunt the Dark Knight

Not all the Mutants have become Sons of Batman. A few follow a Nazified she-demon named Bruno, who decides one night to hold up a liquor store. Batman, disguised as a bag lady, foils the robbery, and is about to pummel information out of Bruno — when something interferes, something faster than a speeding bullet and more powerful than a locomotive. Batman arranges to deal later with this interference. The interference leaves, leaping over a tall building with a single bound.

Batman knows that the Joker plans an escape, and visits an apartment belonging to a fellow named Abner. Abner likes to make bombs. He isn't home, but Robin has a close encounter with one of his handiworks.

Next day: Clark Kent delivers a warning to Bruce Wayne. Batman's stirring up too much controversy — the public just doesn't trust costumed characters. (Superman himself now operates surreptitiously.) Wayne's not scared of Kent's implied threats.

That night: The Joker's psychiatrist — Wolper again — has arranged an appearance by his client on The David Endochrine show. Wolper insists that his client is a changed man. Batman knows better. Unfortunately, Yindel's men foil his aerial assault on the television studio. The Joker murders Endochrine and everyone in his audience, and makes good his escape.

The Joker visits Selina Kyle, formerly the Catwoman, now the owner of an escort agency. The Joker has a plan involving one of Selina's girls, who's scheduled to accompany a congressman that night...

One dead congressman later: Batman shows up on Selina's doorstep — the Joker has, apparently, done terrible things to her — and discovers that his white-faced adversary has forced another of Selina's girls to arrange a similar meeting with the Governor. The police arrive; Batman escapes (just barely); he radios Commissioner Yindel, telling her to save the Governor.

Batman believes (on pretty slim evidence, if you ask me) that the Joker plans to disrupt a County Fair. Sure enough, he's there, passing out poisoned cotton candy to youngsters (none of whom seem to recognise him). Batman and Robin arrive — much violence ensues — The Joker runs into a tunnel of love. There, he and Batman finally have it out. The Joker knifes his old enemy repeatedly, which doesn't stop Batman from wringing the Joker's neck. Yet he can't go all the way. He can't kill him. The Joker decides to finish the job, snapping his own spinal cord.

* * *

That final scene's a major willies-inducer, not least because of the odd sexual overtones. Unconscious overtones? Nah. Miller must have known what he was doing — I mean, he gives us a lipstick-smeared bisexual id-monster repeatedly sticking his "darling" with a phallic knife as they clench in the tunnel of love. How do I know about the bisexuality? Because the fanzines have revealed what Miller only hints at in this story: that the Joker raped and killed Batman's former partner, Jason. We're also led to assume that Mr. J. raped Selina. Like Dennis Hopper's cha-

racter in Blue Velvet, the Joker's after anything that moves: he's the hero's dark doppleganger, the hidden part of the psyche personified. And the ultimate expression of the death-wish. Miller turns the battle between the Joker and the Batman into a clash of chaos and order, of Id and Superego — of warring factions of the same mind.

Aside from all that, Book Three pretty much dispenses with any semblance of a socio-political subtext in favor of a thrills-all-the-way approach.

A few thrills too many, if you ask me. Thematically, this episode does little to annoy. Dramatically, it's the weakest of the series. Granted, part three has some terrific material; anyone who reads the final Batman-Joker liebstod will remember it a lo-onng time, and I love the way Miller handles Superman. But the action arias go way over the top, completely demolishing any semblance of plausibility or logic.

The worst scene starts on page 19 (and by the by, what happened to the page numbers this issue?). Batman decides to invade the David Endochrine (read: Letterman, and his nom-de- comics should have been funnier) program to put the kibosh on the Joker's plans for escape. We've already seen Batman don ingenious disguises earlier in this issue — so why does the masquerade stop here? Why doesn't he simply sneak in, instead of doing things the hard way? The hard way includes making his way past an entire heavily-armed SWAT team, whose presence he should have foreseen. In fact, he can't get past these cops, despite the fact that they've been armed with special bullets that swerve politely out of Batman's way — as

though the bullets were refrigerator magnets, and Batman were oppositely charged.

For that matter, I can't believe that Letter... whoops, Endochrine would want to feature a guest appearance by the Joker on his show. I watch Late Night pretty regularly, and I've never seen anything resembling a criminally insane mass murderer get onto the program (excepting, perhaps, Brother Theodore.) And even if — let's call him Dave — did invite such a creature on, surely the studio would have been crawling with security forces, who would surely have jumped into action the moment Mr. J. made the moves on Dr. Ruth. Or even earlier — like right after he threatened to kill everyone in the room. (After all, when Tom Snyder interviewed Manson, they had plenty of guards in the cell — if Charlie had gotten violent, I wonder whose side they would have taken?) And considering the fact that the police loomed large outside the building, I'm a little astounded that the Joker escaped the premises so easily.

And speaking of unbelievabilities, what's with those little robots? They fly; they talk; they explode; they're almost as snotty as a comic book critic. Pretty fancy stuff — a little too fancy for a Batman story. All right, so Dark Knight is set in some hazily-defined future, when the technology might well be sufficiently advanced to allow for such things. But if such is the case, why don't we see examples of this technology elsewhere? If the robots come complete with an antigravity option, why hasn't Batman (along with everyone else in Gotham) rigged up a device to float through the air mit

der greatest of ease right alongside?

Just how futuristic is this story, anyways? I mean, we get occasional glimpses of scientific breakthroughs that are decades ahead of our present capability — yet Nancy's amanuensis still lives in the White House, and Letterman's still on the air, sporting nary a grey hair. Miller should peg this story's time frame a little more clearly. He doesn't have to give us the exact year, just the decade.

Of course, this not-overwhelmingly-successful third installment sports a particularly inane BS scene. Actually, there's at least two or three, but the worst can be found on page 40 — the Joker has a pistol pointed at the head of a young girl (Carrie's chum, coincidentally), while keeping his eye on Batman. The albino bar-sinister must be particularly slow on the trigger, because Bats has time to toss four razor-sharp batarangs at his enemy — who, upon being hit, fires into the air. Why doesn't any other critic ever mention these incidents? Am I the only comic shop frequenter who can recognise just how ludicrous these scenes are? Wake up, people!

Other sequences fail because they simply move too rapidly, especially that bit with Selina Kyle and the Congressman. (Well, Selina runs an "escort agency," so perhaps it's fitting that this scene reaches a climax as soon as possible.) Even the final shoot-out at the amusement park, the longest set piece in the book, seems compressed to the point of implosion; too often we have to glance back and figure out where we are.

In short: Miller succumbs, in this episode, to Spielberg's Disease.

According to the latest information from the Center For Disease Control in Atlanta, this ailment compels otherwise intelligent and talented visual storytellers to tell their stories too damned fast, and with too little regard for the dictates of logic. Spielberg's Disease has decimated the film industry, and now the plague threatens to overwhelm comics. How sad. (There's a treatment available, but it's severe — it involves Eric Rohmer triple features. Hard cases get hit with Tarkovsky. Not a pretty sight.)

But. This book also has many incisive, funny, exciting and memorable moments. Miller fills Ronzo's every dialogue balloon with hilariously on-target material ("Now, there's been a lot of loose talk these days about nuclear war..."), the scene between Bruce and Clark is wonderfully written, the opening liquor store siege plays very nicely, and the running newsflashes paint a grimly humorous portrait of a society gone mad ("The American Hostages Guild has declared a general strike, in response to treatment of their members in the recent Libyan incident...")

I agree with Miller's sharp observation that, if the Superman were to exist, we would mistrust and fear him. Wasn't that exactly Shaw's point in Saint Joan? Truly good people frighten us. By "good," I refer to virtue, not competence; people admire the merely competent — Lindberg, Muhammed Ali, Babe Ruth, etc. The genuinely virtuous are different. They're weird. Hard to deal with. How many times have you heard people insist that, say, Mother Theresa does what

she does only because she's working out a guilt complex? I've heard that line quite often, always from moderately decent folk who seem to feel guilty about not being similarly selfless. And if a person imbued with such virtue somehow gained the god-like powers of...well, of your average Man of Steel, then society would be monumentally jealous and profoundly freaked; our number one national defense priority would be to build an elephant gun big enough to shoot that mother down.

Terrific art, as always. Apparently, Klaus Janson and Miller came to grief over this issue, the latter accusing the former of doing less than his best. Well, perhaps Janson did daub the Higgins a bit too hastily in some areas — Superman's full-pager looks particularly rushed, as does the studio audience on p. 20. But Janson running on two cylinders still can outpace a lot of other inkers firing on all four.

Lynn Varley is the best painter in the history of comics. Nobody says otherwise. I'll bet the rent money that nobody'll say otherwise twenty years from now, after full-color comics have become the norm. (Though the cover would have looked nicer if she'd cleaned the airbrush. Drop a little Formula 409 into the air cup, Ms. Varley, and let 'er spritz. Does miracles.)

The police have the tunnel of love surrounded; somehow, a near-fatally wounded Batman manages to escape. He recuperates in the Batcave.

Meanwhile: for some weeks now, US and Soviet forces have fought a limited conventional war on the island of Corto Maltese; secret aid from Superman has turned the battle against the Russians. They withdraw, but they demonstrate their displeasure by shooting off a nuke. A special nuke — one calculated to create an electromagnetic pulse. Superman diverts this missile to the desert, where it explodes.

The pulse knocks out all electricity across the United States. Lights won't work, cars won't run, all aircraft crashes — and mob violence threatens to destroy the cities. Mutants, muggers, and psychopaths overrun Gotham — until Batman, riding a dark horse, rallies the Sons of the Batman to his leadership. Under his direction, the city returns to a semblance of order.

Thus ends World War III. Though why it ends there is beyond me.

Oliver Queen — no longer Green Arrow since an altercation with Superman caused the loss of an arm — visits Bruce Wayne, convincing him that the powers-that-be can no longer tolerate the Batman's hijinks. "You have to make the bastards work for you," the radical Robin Hood says.

Washington: Reagan gives the word. Batman's gotta go.

Superman and Batman arrange a final shoot-out in a place called crime alley, on the same street where Bruce Wayne's parents met their end. The latter

came prepared. Superman — still recovering from the nuclear blast — can't deal as effectively as he otherwise might with the heat-seeking missiles, with Batman's armor, with his sonic disruptor, or with his commandeering of the city's power supply. But Oliver gets to fire (using his one good arm and his teeth) the finishing blow: a kryptonite arrow. Superman is beaten — and Wayne suffers a sudden heart attack.

Bruce Wayne, his secret identity revealed to the world, is buried. His house has been destroyed. His butler (far too conveniently) dies of a stroke. His fortune mysteriously disappears.

But Batman won't stay buried. Seems the heart attack was a chemically-induced piece of phonus-balonus. A resurrected Bruce Wayne retreats to the batcave, where he plots to bring down "worse than thieves and murderers," helped by Robin and a small army.

• • •

Remember what I said about Miller's miniseries beginning better than they end? That's true of Ronin, that's true of Elektra, and that's true of his recent Daredevil run. Dark Knight's the exception.

This is one terrific comic book.

Yes, flaws exist. For one thing, the page count is a Procrustes' bed. What with Batman's hair's-breadth escape from Yindel's men, Thermonuclear war (or something nigh unto it), riots in the streets, and the ultimate battle between Supes and

Bats, this comic has one heck of a lot of rush-hour traffic — another 24 pages would have helped this story no end.

And why didn't the Russians launch a second strike, or a conventional invasion force? If the Russian leader lacked sufficient ruthlessness to deal the coup de grace, then why did he strike the first blow? Did hostilities between the two countries cease after we received their fire? Miller leaves far too much unexplained in the transition between pages 32 and 33.

I would also suggest that the television newscasters seem rather too strongly obsessed with Batman throughout most of this episode, considering the distractions posed by world events. And how is it that the government can expunge all media mention of Superman's existence? Who abolished the First Amendment? (On the other hand, maybe that question's naive. In recent months, network news has — despite the Constitution — ignored, or been warned away from, certain important stories that received a lot of play elsewhere in the world. Maybe one of these days, Dan Rather'll be gutsy enough to tell the real scoop about hostage William Buckley.)

And by the way, we encounter one very odd roller coaster in the first few pages. What's holding it up? Invisible plexiglass? Positive thinking? Maybe the same anti-gravity technology that brought us the Joker's robot renegades is at work here. But if so, then why do we see conventional helicopters with whup-whup-whupping rotor blades? Wouldn't anti-gravity technology profoundly affect the course of aviation?

And the in-joke jab at Harlan Ellison just ain't funny. Or credi-

ble. Granted, network news sometimes mixes up its priorities, but I still very much doubt that any newscaster covering World War III would tell his staff "Quick! Get Ellison on the line!"

But I must admit: Miller, unlike any of his Crisis-ridden contemporaries at DC, knows how to handle an apocalypse. The image of Batman charging through the streets of Gotham on a black stallion conveys something almost primal, while the sequence of Superman shrivelling in the shadow of Nuclear Winter absolutely stuns the reader — not least, because Varley shoots these pages up with hallucinogenic reds, violets, and oranges, in sharp contradistinction to the blues and greys that predominate elsewhere. Miller gives us one of the very finest sequences in the history of the medium on pages 27-32, as Gothamites relate, in flashback, what happened as they scurried through the great shadow. Many readers carp about Miller's unrelievedly captious view on humanity; he proves them wrong with this stirring, and convincing, portrait of a leaderless city that quickly evolves from mobocracy into a community.

As always, the greek chorus commentary on those ubiquitous television screens provides some of the book's choicest moments. Who can doubt that Ronzo would announce Armaggedon in exactly those words? "Well folks, I've got some good news, and I've got some bad news..." And who could resist those day-after network newscasters? "Don't miss our special tonight — your favorite stars are asked 'Where were

you when the lights went out?"

As for the battle between Batman and Superman... Well. This is embarrassing to admit. I should have put this stuff behind me, you know. The whole darned civilization should have. Sure, I grew up reading superhero comics, and there's no harm keeping tabs on the genre for nostalgia's sake — but really now. I've been to college. I'm in a respectable career. I'm practically an official member of the booboisie, with a wife and kids and a house and a dog and a life insurance policy and an ulcer.

Someone in that position simply shouldn't enjoy the sight of Batman beating the shit out of Superman. Not this much. Pay no attention to that goofy, toothy grin on my face.

But that's not Miller's last trick. He puts a finish on the story that should've aroused as much controversy as Book One did. Batman, having joined forces with Green Arrow — who has merrily sabotaged the American war machine around the world — apparently has undergone an evolution of sorts. He's no longer after street creeps, he's out "to bring sense to a world plagued by worse than thieves and murderers." To this end, he enlists the Mutants (whose psychopathology has apparently mutated) in his personal army.

Wait a minute — what's he up to?

Remember Batman's address to Clark: "You've always known just what to say. 'Yes'...to anyone with a badge — or a flag..." From which we infer that Wayne won't necessarily say yes to anyone bearing the appropriate symbols of authority. Perhaps he now wants to say a very loud 'no.' After all, the bomb just

dropped. Must've been a disillusioning experience.

I do declare. Seems to me as though Miller's turned Batman, all-American hero and idol of clean living boys 'n' girls everywhere, into a full-fledged revolutionary. If Jerry Falwell ever saw this book, and if he possessed any ability at all to read between the lines, he'd probably find Dark Knight a far more dangerous work than Elektra or any of the other comics targeted by the religionists.

But — exactly sort of new social order does Batman want to advance? The end of Dark Knight leaves us every bit as bewildered as we'd be after a Clint Eastwood movie in which Dirty Harry takes control of the Weather Underground. Whither will they go? Will our future really be safer in the hands of a man who likes to dress up as a bat, accompanied by his merry band of cowed sociopaths?

As I said: Miller is confused and Miller is confusing.

But he tells a great story. And he sure can draw.

DARK KNIGHT 65

Words and Pictures:
A Few Notes
On How Frank Miller Tells a Story

Art critics in all media constantly remind us that we can't divorce style and content. Maybe so. But sometimes a trial separation can prove useful.

Case in point: Frank Miller. We can argue endlessly about his themes, his subjects, his socio-political outlook — but few observers would dispute the fact that he has permanently affected the way mainstream comics are written and drawn, and that he has contributed to our understanding of graphic storytelling. Perhaps we should allow ourselves, though only temporarily, to ignore his matter and examine his manner.

This essay can't claim to deal with Miller's craft in its entirety (such a study would fill a much larger book than the one you hold), so let's concentrate on only a few aspects of his approach to storytelling. It's a unique approach, one that has not only given us new insight into the comics medium, but also illustrates the relationships between comics and other forms of narrative.

* * *

When a writer matures, we often say that he has "found his voice." The interesting thing about Miller's voice is that you never really hear it. He's unusually silent, for a comic book author.

In Batman: Year One, as in most other places, Miller dispenses with third-person omniscient narration. Instead, Bruce Wayne and Lieutenant Gordon describe the book's events, where description is necessary, in what we assume to be diary extracts. "I am doing this" replaces "He does that."

Miller's near-total reliance on the first-person format probably derives from film. For reasons that defy easy analysis, third-person narration always seems somehow wrong in movies; usually, any movie that employs narration at all lets the main character do the voice-over chattering (e.g., Blade Runner, Sunset Boulevard). No film theorist has ever explained this state of affairs; all we know is that film-makers, operating mostly on instinct, have hit upon certain strategies, and they seem to work. Yet the techniques of comics and films remained strangely divergent in this regard — until Frank Miller took over the writing and drawing of Daredevil.

Mind you, I'm a little hesitant to peg Frank Miller as the originator of this approach, or any approach, for every stylistic "innovation" has its predecessors; one of art's few truisms holds that there's nothing new except that which has been forgotten. But few would deny that yesterday's comics creators — either through habit, inclination, or the editor's dictates — generally wrote according to a far different, far more rigid standard. Mainstream comics writers once seemed to believe that a panel without verbiage was somehow naked; all pictures had to be "dressed" with words, and those words, when not enclosed by a dialogue balloon, had to be written in the third-person, present tense. That was the format. Anything different might "confuse the readers." In the mid-'70s, as the readership aged and, presumably, became less easily confused, writers for Marvel began to feel a little constricted by the traditional approach. Master of Kung Fu, Deathlok and other books experimented with first-person narration, and even (in the case of Werewolf by Night) second- person narration.

In his first Daredevil run, Miller went further still. He tossed out most captions and all thought balloons, thereby assuming the same limitations as the screenwriter. Dialogue now had to carry much more of the expository burden, and all action had to be clearly demonstrated, because the author wasn't going to make sure we "got it" by explaining what we saw. Miller's approach advanced the form and secured his position as a seminal comics creator, for he brought a new interdependence of word and image; he emphasized, to a degree rarely encountered previously, the connections between comics technique and cinematic technique. When reading out loud to children at bedtime, you can usually make do with the average issue of, say, Spider-Man; only occasionally will you need to show the illustrations to your audience. But a Miller comic can never be read out loud. Indeed, a story by Miller — or by Moore, Eisner, Chaykin and damn few others — isn't really read at all. More accurately, we should say that such stories are read-seen.

I know — "read-seen" is an awkward phrase, a terrible phrase. But the fact is that for all the talk

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